

# *The Silver Spring Library*

*1931 - 2006: Enriching Lives for Seventy-five Years*

The Silver Spring Library traces its beginnings to the summer of 1931, when Mrs. Charlotte D. Beers opened a small library in the East Silver Spring School (located on the north side of Silver Spring Avenue between Carroll Lane and Schrider Street) as a project of the Woman's Improvement Club. The club was given permission by the Superintendent of Schools to use three vacant rooms at the school as a library during the summer term. By the end of the summer, 600 books had been collected and a children's story hour program had been established. From these humble beginnings, through times marked by the Great Depression, segregation, wars, prosperity, and hopes and dreams for equality and a better America, today's Silver Spring Library and to some extent the Montgomery County public library system was created.

## **Silver Spring in the Early 1930s**

Silver Spring in 1931 was very different from the Silver Spring of 2006. In the 1920s Silver Spring had changed from an essentially rural area of farms and country estates of wealthy Washingtonians to an area of suburban development. But the Silver Spring of 1931 was not the high density urban suburb of today; it was on the fringes of development. Much undeveloped land remained between Silver Spring and downtown Washington. Georgia Avenue (then called Brookeville Road in Maryland) was the only road to downtown.



**Downtown Silver Spring, about 1926**

Although there had been some homes built near the B&O railroad line in downtown Silver Spring and in Woodside, the first modern style automobile-based development came in the 1920s with the Blair and Woodside Park subdivisions in 1922 and 1923. Other subdivisions such as Seven Oaks followed, but none of them were immediately filled with new homes. As late as 1917 Silver Spring had been described as having 75 dwellings, 10 stores, a mill, and a national bank. This description excluded the far out developments of Woodside

and Forest Glen. There were animal pens and a slaughter house north of Colesville Road just west of Georgia Avenue. A poultry farm was located on the southeast corner of Colesville Road and Georgia Avenue. There was no police force until 1922 when the new Montgomery County force assigned one officer to Silver Spring. Fire protection, such as it was, had begun in 1915 with the organization of the Silver Spring Volunteer Fire Company shortly after the Post Office burned down.

Commercial development also only began in earnest in the 1920s. The Silver Spring National Bank built a new building in 1924. By 1925 a new feed and coal office and warehouse was built just north of the B&O station. A building boom in 1927 saw construction of Silver Spring's first theater, the Masonic Temple (still on the southeast corner of Georgia and Wayne Avenues), the North Washington Realty Company building, and several small office buildings and stores. Georgia Avenue south of Colesville Road was also widened to six lanes with a landscaped median during this period. North of Colesville Road, it remained a two lane country road.

Silver Spring's boom of the 1920's did not last long. With the coming of the Great Depression in late 1929, development almost stopped. Silver Spring's new suburban residents, who may have numbered as many as 10,000, worried about being able to keep their homes. Indeed some prominent residents lost their new homes to foreclosure. Many unsold lots in the new subdivisions were taken over by Montgomery County for unpaid taxes. Some were later sold for little more than \$50.

## **Founding a Library**

The establishment of a public library in this environment was a truly amazing development. Yet the library was only the latest civic improvement sponsored by the Woman's Improvement Club, which was founded as the "Ladies Cooperative Improvement Society of Silver Spring." The group held its first meeting in a barn in the 8100 block of Georgia Avenue in October 1913. A year and a half later it was instrumental in establishing the Volunteer Fire Company. The next year they raised funds and paid the Potomac Electric Power Company to install the first 17 street lights in Silver Spring, which were switched off at midnight to save money. The group paid for Silver Spring's street lighting for the next 11 years. They pressed for sewer installation in 1922. The club's name was changed to "Woman's Improvement Club" in 1924.

The club began work toward a public library in 1929 when it appointed a committee to work with other civic organizations to establish a County library system. No County system was established, but that did not stop the Silver Spring ladies.

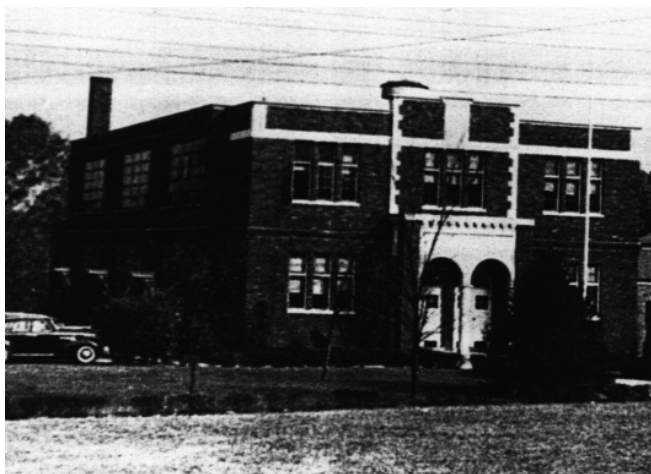
In October 1930 Mrs. Charlotte D. Beers was appointed chair of the Woman's Improvement Club's "library extension

## What A Library Should Mean

In the library the community has a force potent enough to render more good to the populace than any single force or body I know. Unlike the church, it serves people of all creeds; unlike the school, its doors are open to people of all ages; its shelves are open to one and all regardless of race or worldly possessions. It can do more to educate the people, young and old, to help keep a democratic, representative government alive and to destroy hates and narrow thoughts than any other means known. For it is through the written word that is the library's stock and trade that the average human being better understands himself, his fellow men, his immediate surroundings, and the world at large. In increasing the facilities of its library the community enlarges its own viewpoint and its scope of understanding – the understanding by one and all of the involved factors that go to make up human existence, an understanding that will make the world a finer place to live.

– R.S. Dillon, Jr., as quoted in "Your Library," the Silver Spring Library's 1945 pamphlet

service" and began work to establish a children's library. Without her work, there would have been no library. Her role was so important that on her death in 1937, the Library Board called her "the mother of the Silver Spring Library." Mrs. Beers and others collected the first books for the library in a wagon. By the summer of 1931 they had 600 books and the permission of Dr. E. W. Broome, Superintendent of Schools, to open the library in three rooms of the East Silver Spring School beginning July 1, when summer school started. The new children's library proved to be a great success. The Woman's Improvement Club started raising funds through bake sales, rummage sales, card parties, and benefit movies and plays to establish a permanent library.



**East Silver Spring Elementary School**

On October 10, 1931 Mrs. Beers called a meeting of citizens to form an Organizing Committee for a library association.

The assembled citizens decided to put out a call to all civic groups between Forest Glen Road and the District line asking them to send two delegates to an organizing meeting which was held on November 13<sup>th</sup>. Eighteen organizations sent delegates to the meeting, which was attended by about 50 people. A draft Library Association constitution and by-laws were presented, and a nominating committee for a Permanent Board of Trustees was announced. The Board itself was to be elected in January 1932.



**The Woman's Improvement Club players raise money for the library, May 4, 1932**

While formal organizing of the Library Association was under way, the Organizing Committee collected 400 more books, including titles for adults as well as children. They reopened the library in a room at the East Silver Spring School on December 1, 1931 with a 1,000 book collection housed in three book cases. Some of the furniture for the library, including the bookcases, was made by Allen Federman's manual training students at the Silver Spring-Takoma Park High School. Women volunteers kept the library open to the public two hours each on two afternoons and one evening each week. Children's storytelling sessions were held in the afternoons.

The library was a shoestring effort. Most of the books which had been donated for the library were used and needed repair. Volunteers went to the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore to learn how to repair and rebind books.

The Woman's Improvement Club provided most of the funding for the new library. They put on the play "Three Pegs" at the SECO Theater at 8242 Georgia Avenue on two nights in October 1931 and two one-act "Bicentennial [of George Washington's birth] Plays" at the Woodside Methodist Episcopal Church in May 1932. They raised almost \$800 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$11,775 in 2006) for the library. [The interest of the Woman's Improvement Club in the library did not end in 1932; when the group disbanded in 1954, it donated all its remaining funds to the library to help furnish the "browsing room."]

Responsibility for the library shifted from the Organizing Committee to the Silver Spring Library Association on January 30, 1932, when the Association's first annual meeting was held. Mrs. Beers opened the meeting by explaining what

had been done to date to establish a library. Then the draft constitution and by-laws were adopted and the first Board of Trustees was elected from the slate proposed by the nominating committee. Mrs. Beers, Mrs. C.W. Mitchell, Miss Lavinia Engle, and Miss Mildred Page were elected for two year terms. Elected to one year terms were J. Guy Neal, Dr. Howell Forsythe, and Paul Coughlan. An advisory counsel consisting of a member from each church, civic club and PTA in the library's service area was also to be established. The first year's budget was to be \$800. A total of \$117.65 was on hand. (By the end of the year, the Association had actually spent \$497.30 – equivalent in purchasing power to about \$7,325 in 2006. \$536.24 had been raised. About \$350 of this amount had been donations from organizations, some of which conducted special fund raising events for the library.)

Under the newly adopted constitution, membership in the Association was open to anyone in the library's service area who paid \$1.00 per year (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$14.75 in 2006) dues. The seven members of the Board of Trustees were to run the Association and elect the officers.



**Silver Spring Library block print. Note the Silver Spring Acorn Gazebo at the left.**

There was considerable community interest in the new library. Two professional librarians, Ms. Adelaide Hasse of the Brookings Institution, and R.W. Johnston of the Bureau of Railway Economics, volunteered their assistance during the first annual meeting. Assistance was also provided by Adelene Pratt of the State of Maryland Public Library Advisory Commission. County Commissioner Lacy Shaw made a commitment that plans for the new County Office Building would include three rooms with a separate entrance for the library. The new building was to be completed by July 1933.

The Board of Trustees met monthly. Mrs. Beers was elected President at the Board's first meeting on February 12, 1932.

She directed the work of the volunteers who staffed the library and prepared books for use. Plans for the Advisory Council were finalized at the March meeting. It would have one member from each active civic and educational organization in the service area. Political and religious organizations were not to be represented. The council was active in fund raising and collecting books over the years.

By the March meeting even more books had been gathered. The collection totaled 1,108 books. More book shelves and



**"A Corner of the Silver Spring Library" (in the East Silver Spring Elementary School), *Maryland News*, June 9, 1933**

more tables were needed. To meet this need and the need for more books and more money, three committees were established, Building and Equipment, Books, and Finance. Registered borrowers totaled 179 by the March meeting, but paid membership lagged. By the end of the year there were still only 71 paid memberships. The \$1.00 membership fee, which seems modest today, was too much for many residents in the depth of the Depression.

On September 22, 1932, the library was formally incorporated under the laws of Maryland as a non-political, non-religious, and non-profit organization devoted to the cultural and educational interests of Silver Spring.

The poor membership level probably reflected the hard times of the Depression more than any lack of interest in the library. The library's Board decided not to conduct any fund raising in 1933 because of the "demands on the charitable agencies within the area at this time to care for the physical requirements of the needy." It was the Board's "desire not to detract or divert any of these charitable funds to its own use." This was not an idle gesture given the suffering resulting from the Depression. The library's second year budget was set at \$525 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$8,150 in 2006), of which \$250 was to be used to buy books. The \$525 was to be raised by asking civic organizations to urge their members to join the Library Association by paying \$1.00 dues. This idea worked. By the end of 1932 the library had a total of 495 paid members.

Despite the library Board's desire not to compete with Depression relief efforts by actively raising funds, gifts were received from individuals and groups. A card party held at the Indian Springs Country Club (now the site of the YMCA and neighboring Beltway interchange) raised \$118 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$1,830 in 2006). In addition a Book Week was held which resulted in the donation of 500

## The Silver Spring Library – Changing Lives in the 1930s

One of the first users of the new library was the Waldrop family. Francis Waldrop got his first library card when he was about six years old and quickly devoured all the science books in the library. He even had the library obtain science books from the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore. Dr. Waldrop says that if it had not been for the books he found at the library, he probably would not have become a physician.

usable books to the library. The High School manual training students came through again and built five new bookcases and a book truck for all the new books. They also made book ends and poster holders. The Montgomery County School Board also donated \$200 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$3,100 in 2006) for “supplemental reading” books for the schools.

### A New Home for the Library

During 1933 it became clear that the library’s need for more space would not be met by space in the new County Office building after all. The death of Violet Blair Janin and her donation to the State of Maryland of 16 acres and her home at Georgia Avenue and Eastern Avenue provided another option. The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission was given responsibility for the gift and established Jesup Blair Park on the site.

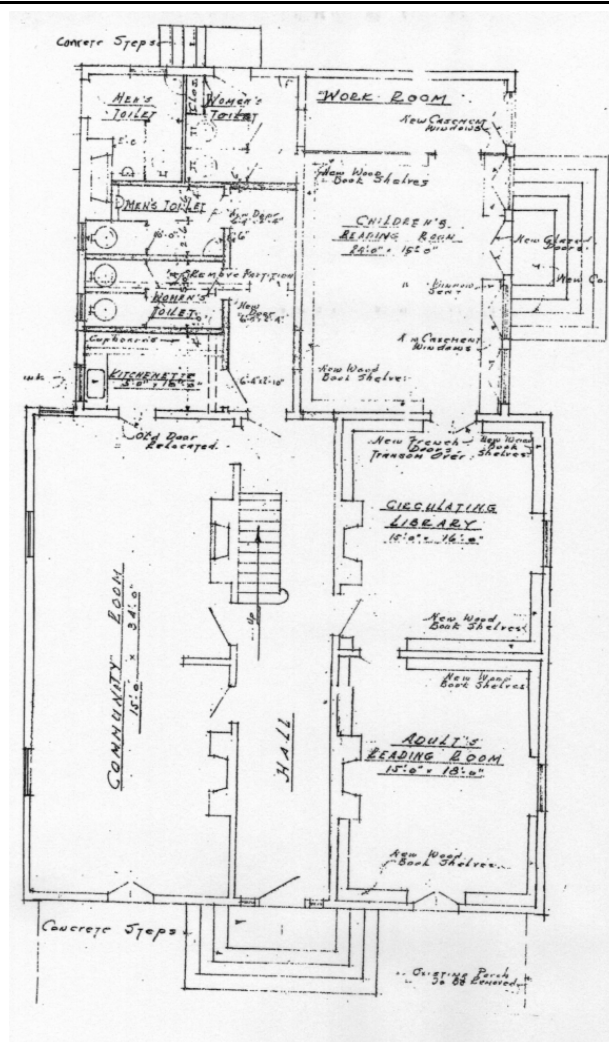
Mrs. Archibald Small of Woodside Park realized that the Janin home, which became known as the Jesup Blair Community House, in the new park could meet the library’s needs. She interested Senator Blair Lee in the idea. The Park and Planning Commission already had plans for the building but was persuaded to change them to include the library.



**Jesup Blair Community House.** Sketch by Mrs. Clyde Brown, 1934

On March 16, 1934, the *Maryland News* described plans for the new library in the park:

The first floor [of the renovated house] will include a main library room, an adult’s reading room in which there will be a reference library, a children’s



**Plans for renovation of the first floor of the Jesup Blair Community House for use as the Silver Spring Library, 1934**

room with French Windows and a separate entrance, and a work room for library staff. There will also be a large community room where various organizations may meet.... The exterior of the house will be repainted and remodeled in the Georgian style of architecture. It is estimated that it will cost \$10,000 [equivalent in purchasing power to about \$150,525 in 2006] to remodel the building, in which a new plumbing and heating system will be installed. Materials are being furnished by the park and planning commission and the work done by the C.A. [Civil Works Administration] workers.... The library association, delighted with the prospect of occupying quarters in this historic old mansion, is planning to furnish the library rooms in keeping with the dignity of the location.

The renovation was sorely needed since the home had been constructed in 1850.

Many individuals and groups also contributed to the new library. The almost \$800 that had been raised by the Woman’s Improvement Club through their plays was used to purchase books, a charging desk, a typewriter, and other items for the new library. The Home Interest Club donated \$200 for high



school level reference books. The Woodside Woman's Club provided draperies and chairs and a bulletin board for the children's room. The Current Comment Club purchased, made, and hung draperies for the adult room. The Lions Club provided tables and chairs for the reading room. The merchants' association donated \$25.00 for a picture file cabinet. The Forest Glen Reading Club bought a lamp for the catalog file cases and Benjamin Hard made and donated another table for the children's room to match one he had made and donated earlier.

The library moved into the Jesup Blair Community House on September 15, 1934. A celebration tea was held the next day attended by the president of the Maryland Library Association and representatives of the state library office, the District of Columbia Public Library, Montgomery County school officials, and prominent citizens.

The new library was open extended hours: Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 3:00 to 5:00 and from 7:00 to 9:00 p.m. As it became more popular, several issues arose – maximum fines for overdue books and how to collect them (ultimately left to the discretion of the librarian, but never more than the cost of the book), whether to let children borrow adult books, and distribution of political and religious material (kept in a file, but not displayed).

A small rental collection had been established to expand the availability of adult books. In February 1933, for example, there were 21 rental books, mostly recent fiction, in the collection compared to 1,601 free books. The rental program was expanded in 1934. The rental fee (ten cents the first week and two cents a day after that) was used to pay for the books. When a book had been paid for, it was placed in the free collection. The rental policy was abandoned in May 1947.

Even with the rental collection, books were in short supply. Keeping books in good condition was a necessity. Initially, volunteers learned how to repair books; other books were taken to a bindery in Baltimore to be rebound. In 1935 WPA workers repaired books, but their work was judged not to be satisfactory, and in 1936 a retired bookbinder was hired "by the hour at a low rate." In later years, books were again sent to a commercial bindery.

The State of Maryland "Traveling Library" also was used to add needed books to the collection. The "Traveling Library" program supplied boxes of 30 to 35 books on temporary loan for a charge to the library of \$1.00 and later \$2.00 per box to cover postage costs. Specific titles could also be requested from the program, but the borrower requesting the book had to pay the postage.

### **Public Funding for the Library**

It became apparent during the library's first three years of operation that tax support was going to be necessary despite donations from individuals and groups, income from membership fees and fines, and (mostly) in-kind support from the schools and the Park and Planning Commission. The Board of Trustees appointed a committee to study the matter in January 1935. Stephen James, a past president of the Montgomery County Civic Federation, chaired the committee. It was to consider two options: (1) establishing a County library system which would include the Silver Spring Library, and (2) establishing a special taxing area for the library. The

committee reported back in March 1935 with the conclusion that it was impractical to establish a County library system. Instead they recommended requesting that the Maryland General Assembly pass a law during its 1935 session to allow the Montgomery County Board of County Commissioners to establish a special taxing area for library purposes and set a tax rate of two cents per \$100 of assessed valuation. The Board of Trustees accepted the report and requested support of community organizations for the needed legislation. A bill was introduced and passed by the General Assembly and signed into law:

The County Commissioners of Montgomery County are hereby authorized to levy a tax not exceeding two cents (2¢) on each one hundred dollars (\$100.00) of valuation of all the assessable property in Precincts 1, 2, 5, 7, and 8 of the Thirteenth Election District, known as the Silver Spring Election District in said County, for the maintenance and support of the Public Library now located in the Jesup Blair Community House at Silver Spring, and which tax shall be payable by the County Treasurer upon proper vouchers submitted by the Trustees of the Silver Spring Public Library Association, provided, however, that the said Trustees of the Silver Spring Public Library Association shall employ a trained librarian to have charge of said Library, and the proceeds of said tax may be used for paying the salary of said librarian and for the purchase of books or for the payment of other expenses in connection with the maintenance of said Library.

This new law only allowed the County Commission to create the library taxing area. It did not require it. The Board of Trustees wanted public support before requesting that the County Commissioners actually establish the tax. During 1935



**Librarian Lousie C. Ferguson and Junior Library Assistant Loretta Page serve patrons, about 1945**

the Board sought and received resolutions supporting the new tax from all the civic organizations in Silver Spring. In January 1936 the Library Association formally requested that the Board of County Commissioners establish the special taxing area, noting that the Silver Spring Library tax was needed until the County could establish a County-wide library system.

The County Commissioners passed the required ordinance and included the library tax in the levy for 1935-36. The assessment was renewed by the County Commissioners each year until 1943 when new State legislation made it permanent with no annual action by the County Commissioners required.

Upon passage of the tax, which the Library Board estimated would raise \$2,200 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$31,925 in 2006) during the year beginning on July 1, 1936, the first year, the Board began recruiting a professional librarian, who would be paid \$1,500 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$21,765 in 2006) per year. They soon hired Louise Ferguson, who had graduated from the University of Wisconsin Library School and who had worked in Milwaukee and Chicago. She assumed her position on July 1, 1936. The library's schedule was also changed so it would be open 28 hours a week. Volunteers continued to staff the library, but paid staff (50¢ an hour) also were recruited to help staff the library in the evenings. In addition, a library page was hired to shelve books for ten hours a week. The new tax revenue was not sufficient to cover all the library's costs. Membership dues were continued at a dollar a year and fund raising activities continued.

At the end of 1936, after six months of tax support, the library's collection contained 5,000 volumes and annual circulation was 23,309. At the end of 1938, after two and a half years of tax funding, the collection had grown by 36 percent to 6,780 books. Circulation had grown by 84 percent to 42,990.

The library continued to grow. In 1941 a Maryland State Planning Commission survey ranked the book collection in various categories among the 6 or 8 best libraries of the 39 surveyed. Because of the growth the library's rooms in the Jesup Blair Community House were becoming inadequate. A new site was needed. In 1937 the Board of Trustees proposed that the hearing room on the main floor of the County Silver Spring office building be converted to house the library. The County Attorney quashed this plan by ruling that the library could not be given space in the County building. Next the Board proposed increasing the library tax and building a new library east of the Silver Spring Armory. This would have required transfer of County-owned land to the Library Association. The needed legislation was never passed.

The space needs continued. Another solution was found in 1941 when the Maryland General Assembly authorized the

County and the Park and Planning Commission to spend \$21,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$288,145 in 2006) to build an addition onto the Jesup Blair Community House. The formal opening of the addition was held on July 26, 1942 "with simple war time refreshments."

### **Segregation**

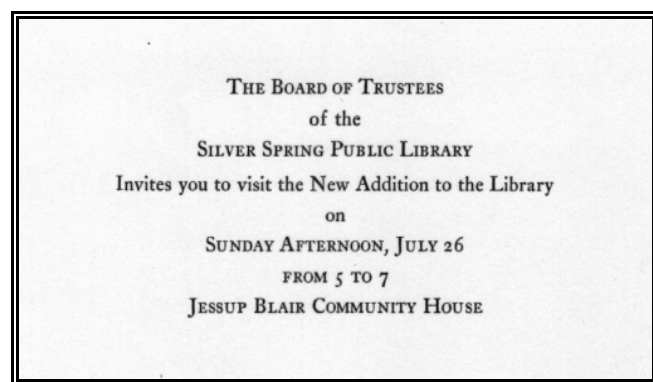
With tax support and increased library usage, the Library Board of Trustees sought guidance on what must have been a difficult issue for them, racial segregation of the library. Montgomery County, like Maryland as a whole, was segregated, with separate "but equal" schools and other services. The extent of the "but equal" is evidenced by the fact that there was no library for non-whites. In 1939 the Board sought legal guidance from the County Commissioners, saying "A demand by colored persons for cards and other library privileges is anticipated. When and if that occasion arises, the Board of Trustees desires to act in a proper and legal manner." They asked if the library could "decline to issue library cards or to permit participation by colored persons residing in the taxing area in the circulation of books and magazines from the library, or in other library privileges?" What they wanted to do is clear from another statement in the letter saying they were "sympathetic towards the establishment of library facilities for colored persons" and would donate books to any such library established in the taxing area.

The response from the County Commission's legal counsel is unknown, but the issue did not go away. In June 1944 the Board of Trustees minutes states "it was the consensus of opinion that the handling of the negro question should be left to the librarian. The former ruling of the board, whereby a questionable person would have to have the signature of a board member, is to be disregarded." Not long thereafter the library published a new pamphlet which featured the "What a Library Should Mean," which said libraries are "open to one and all regardless of race or worldly possessions." It is unclear whether the library actually lived up to these words immediately, but by the time the new library opened in 1957 there was no question but that everyone was welcome.

### **World War II and the First Branch Library**

World War II affected the library in many ways. Circulation dropped as gas rationing made it more difficult for people to come to the library. Non-fiction, including "war books" and biography, essays, plays, and religion, became more popular relative to fiction. Reference books became more heavily used. The Board allocated a special \$100 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$1,375 in 2006) to purchase "national defense" books. Those in the military service who wanted to use the library but who were stationed outside the taxing area were given free library cards. It also became harder to staff the library despite the fact that more money was available to hire staff – tax revenues had grown to \$7,600 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$104,280 in 2006) because of new buildings and higher valuations. Hours were shortened because of lack of staff.

The relative remoteness of the library in Jesup Blair Park led to establishment of the library's first branch location in 1943. The Willis Motor Company, which was located on the east side of Georgia Avenue just north of Colesville Road, – very close to the busy Silver Spring Shopping Center and all the stores along Colesville Road – donated space for a small branch. People could easily stop by the branch library while



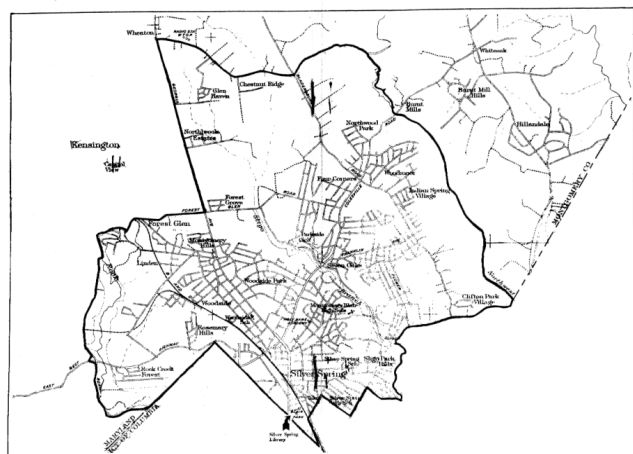
**Grand Opening Invitation for the Library Addition, 1942**

doing their shopping. However, staffing problems combined with problems with the donated space led the board to close the branch in November 1944.

### The Post-War Era

Even in 1944 it was clear that the library in Jesup Blair Park would be inadequate to meet post-war needs. The population was expected to continue expanding at a rapid rate. In January 1945, having consulted with the Park and Planning Commission and the Maryland Post-War Planning Committee, a special committee reported to the Library Board that a new library would surely be needed and that it ought to be located close to the intersection of Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road. County-owned land near the Armory was again proposed. Other proposals were also made. Dr. Broome, Montgomery County Superintendent of Schools, proposed that the library build a new building on the Montgomery Blair High School grounds at Wayne Avenue and Dale Drive. He also suggested that branches be established at schools in Montgomery Hills and Four Corners. After further consultations, the Board decided not to build a library and establish branches on school property but instead to build a main library without branches. A new building with space for 50,000 books was estimated to cost \$100,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$836,900 in 2006). A lot at least 20,000 square feet would also be needed. In May 1948 a building fund was established.

The projections that a new library would be needed after World War II rapidly came to pass. Silver Spring grew dramatically. The Hecht Company built its first suburban department store in Silver Spring. It was soon followed by new Sears and J.C. Penney stores as well as many specialty shops. Silver Spring became the busiest commercial area between Baltimore and Richmond except for downtown Washington, D.C.



Map of the Silver Spring Library's service area, 1945

With the growth came demands for more library service and the need for more funds. The Library Board proposed doubling the tax rate to four cents per \$100 of assessed valuation and proceeded to gather support for this idea from community organizations. Based on this support the Maryland General Assembly passed the tax increase in March 1947. Tax funds for the library increased from \$8,221.73 in 1947 to \$20,521.07 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$171,900

in 2006) in 1948 because of the tax rate increase, higher valuations, and new buildings in the taxing area. With the tax increase, the library finally ended its membership fee, which had previously been reduced to 25 cents a year. In 1950, the assessment was levied for the first time on property north of Wheaton, bringing tax revenues to \$41,745.86 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$349,375 in 2006). Even with this increase, however, the Silver Spring Library's per capita income was only 59 cents in 1950 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$4.94 in 2006).

The growing post-war demand for library services also led to an expansion of library hours. In 1949, for example, the library was open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday hours were from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

The increased funding allowed increased service. The tax legislation specifically said tax funds could be used to purchase, rent, or build library facilities. A small branch was opened in 1948 in rooms supplied by the Marvin Memorial Methodist Church. The branch later moved to rented space in the Four Corners Shopping Center. A small branch was also established in Wheaton in December 1950 following Wheaton's addition to the tax area.

### A County Library System

The increasing demand for library services after World War II was not limited to Silver Spring. The idea of establishing a County-wide library system was one whose time had finally come. The Maryland General Assembly had passed a new Public Libraries Law in 1945. It empowered the counties to establish County libraries and provided funds for books. In November 1949 the County Council created a library advisory committee to study the County library concept. There were eight independent public libraries in Montgomery County at the time. In addition to Silver Spring, which had the largest collection at 21,000 books, the independent libraries were: Bethesda (20,000 books), Gaithersburg (2,500 books), Garrett Park (1,300 books), Kensington (Noyes Library, 8,000 books), Rockville (8,000 books); Sandy Spring (Sherwood Community Library, less than 1,000 books), and Takoma Park (8,500 books).

In April 1950 the County Council's library advisory committee filed its report and recommended establishment of a County Library with a Library Board to be appointed by the County Council. All existing libraries would continue to operate, and new library buildings were proposed for Silver Spring and Bethesda.

In May 1950 the Maryland General Assembly considered a bill specifically to allow the Montgomery County Council to establish a Department of Public Libraries. The Silver Spring Library Board of Trustees endorsed the legislation, which was passed.

The County Council promptly established a County Library Board and began negotiations with the independent libraries to incorporate them into the new County system. In October the Silver Spring Library Board of Trustees voted to approve the new County library plan and negotiate with the County librarian when one was appointed.

The County Council appointed George B. Moreland County librarian in February 1951, but failed to appropriate any

money for the new Department of Public Libraries. Popular outcry at the lack of funding was so great that the Council was forced to reconsider and appropriate necessary funds.

The Silver Spring Library Board of Trustees began negotiations with Mr. Moreland and soon came to an agreement to transfer to the County on July 1, 1951 all of its facilities, equipment, and books. The total value of the property to be given to the County was \$90,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$681,190 in 2006). In addition the County would receive approximately \$12,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$93,100 in 2006) in investments and other assets of the Silver Spring Library. The County would take over management of the Silver Spring Library and its branches in Four Corners and Wheaton. The County also agreed to operate the facilities at its expense and maintain service "equal to or better than that in effect at the time of the transfer," to maintain all library employees in comparable positions, and to assume the library's liabilities. The Silver Spring Library's \$12,000 in investments would be used only to build a new library in Silver Spring. The County also agreed that it would hire an architect within two years to plan a new library, and that it would acquire a site and begin construction as soon as practical.

The Silver Spring Library Association approved the agreement at a special membership meeting on April 30, 1951. The Board of Trustees was also authorized to dissolve the Silver Spring Library Association as soon as the merger agreement with the County was signed.

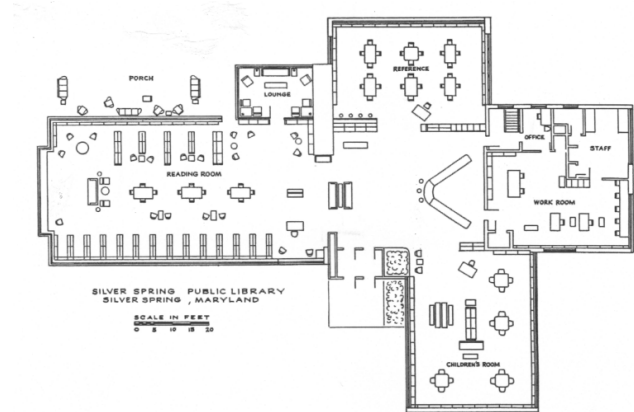
The formal merger of the Silver Spring Library and other participating libraries into the County library system took place on July 1, 1951. Takoma Park, Rockville, and Bethesda elected not to join the system initially, although Rockville and Bethesda joined later. The Silver Spring Library, with its two branches and large reference collection, was the linchpin of the new County system.

### A New Library on Colesville Road

The County began planning for a new Silver Spring Library. Rhees Burket, a local architect, was hired to design the new building.

One critical element in this was to find a site that met all the requirements – a large enough lot, preferably on a corner, and available for no more than the \$31,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$234,200 in 2006) allocated in the capital budget for site acquisition. Seven sites were seriously considered. The final decision was made between two sites. One was the northwest corner of Georgia Avenue and Ballard Street. This site totaled 60,000 square feet and had a 250 feet frontage on Georgia Avenue. But as soon as money was authorized for site acquisition the owner increased the price from 50¢ a square foot to 75¢ a square foot. In January 1954 the price went up again. The County was notified that the "owner stated she would hold out for \$1.00 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$7.55 in 2006) per square foot if it took ten years." The increasing price made the other finalist site, which was considered the second choice since it was not a corner lot, much more attractive. The County had acquired the lot at 8901 Colesville Road from the Hecht Company in a deal in which the County agreed to spend \$500,000 (equivalent in purchasing power to about \$3,777,200 in 2006) to purchase a large plot east of the Silver Spring Armory for use as a

parking lot. The new parking lot would help solve the Hecht Company's parking problems for its large nearby department store. In exchange the Hecht Company would give the 70,000 square foot property on Colesville Road to the County for erection of a public building. This property had a 188.61 foot frontage on Colesville Road extended back about 350 feet to Ellsworth Drive. Although this was not a corner lot, Mr. Burket considered that it had enough frontage on Colesville Road to "allow for a good building." The frontage on Ellsworth Drive also mitigated the fact that the site was not a corner lot. The County Library Board unanimously approved the site on January 21, 1954.



**Plan for the Silver Spring Library, 1957**

Almost exactly three years later, the current Silver Spring Library building opened on January 26, 1957. According to the *Silver Spring Record* on January 27th:

Rhees Burket, the Architect, went all out on this building. And from the looks of things he had a fairly free hand in design and equipment. As a matter of fact, if the sign wasn't out front we doubt if you would guess it to be a library. It looks more like a new home built by some Texas oil or ranch man.

We do not tell you this in any form of criticism because we like the looks of it. And it is hard to imagine any place we would rather spend a couple of hours reading a book or looking up something in the excellent research library.

Regardless of what you had planned for this afternoon, we would suggest you stop by this beautiful building and take advantage of the books and the atmosphere. You will thoroughly enjoy it, even though the cost got up to around \$300,000 [equivalent in purchasing power to about \$2,153,400 in 2006].

The people of Silver Spring should be proud of their new library and use it to the fullest. No doubt they will, especially since there is a large meeting room on the lower level. This should also be an ideal place for special art and other exhibits.

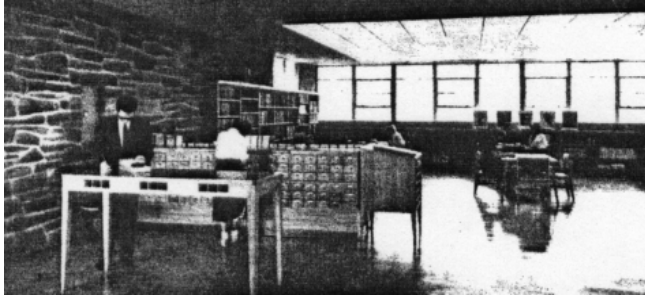
Very luckily, the site of the library had grown trees which add to the beauty of the place. There are ample parking places for autos and bicycles. Nothing has been left out.

According to another press report:

Washington birthday sales will never have greater



**New Library Children's Room, 1957**



**New Library Card Catalog Area, 1957**

success than the opening of the new Silver Spring Library.

In the two days since its opening, the library on Colesville Road has loaned out nearly 12 per cent of its books. 3000 were borrowed on the first day, Saturday, January 26, and 1,800 were loaned Monday.

Nearly 200 registration cards were applied for also. According to librarians, this total is "phenomenal."

#### **Decorating is Modern**

Interior decorating of the first floor carries a brown and aqua modern theme. Lounge chairs and sofas are sprinkled around the main reading room and browsing room.

The first floor of the library has the children's room [the wing toward the driveway], reference room [the children's area in 2006], reading room where

nonfiction and magazines are shelved, a browsing room, lobby, workroom, and staff room.

Two lecture rooms, three storage rooms and rest rooms are found on the ground floor. At the side of the building was a porch which will be open for use in warmer weather. The parking lot in the back holds about fifty cars.

#### **Ten Staff Library**

Eight full-time and two part-time workers staff the library. They are: Virginia Peters, librarian; Mrs. Inez Davis, reference librarian; Mrs. Katherine Schaeffer, young people's librarian; Mrs. Kathryn Tiedman, an assistant librarian; Miss Mary Dillon, children's librarian; Miss Julia McIntire, children's assistant librarian; Mrs. Elmer Nelson, Mrs. Earl Kennard, Mrs. Robert Heller, and Mr. Paul Lehman, clerical assistants.

The main floor of the new library was 12,000 square feet in size and was designed for a collection of 35,000 books. The building was thoroughly modern and included central air-conditioning and shadowless ceiling lighting in addition to large window areas to bring in natural light. Light birch wood was used throughout for furniture and shelving.

Use of the library shot up with the opening of the new building. In the first year alone, there was a 72 percent increase in circulation, to about 400,000 volumes. The number of registered borrowers increased to over 10,000. Parking became inadequate; in 1966 the County purchased the 1½ acre lot next to the library to expand the parking lot; part of the lot was also eventually developed into a park.

About the time the new library opened, the circulation system was modernized. Until this time, all books had a pocket glued into the inside back cover. The book's author, title, and catalog number were typed onto the pocket. A card was placed inside the pocket which also had the author, title, and catalog number typed on it. When someone checked out the book, the borrower wrote their name on the card, which was replaced in the pocket with another card stamped with the date the book was due. The signed card was filed by the librarian according to the due date so overdue books could be readily identified.



**Virginia Peters, Librarian, and the Silver Spring Library, Washington Post, July 31, 1960**



**Librarian Virginia Peters and Children's librarian Mary Dillon test the new experimental photographic charging system for possible use in the new building, Maryland News, April 26, 1956**

The new system replaced the cards in the pockets that were signed by the borrowers with a photographic system. The inside back cover of the book with the pocket with its identifying material was photographed along with the borrower's library card, producing a chronological record on film of all books checked out and their borrowers.

### The Silver Spring Library – Changing Lives in the 1950s and 1960s

When Larry Dickter was growing up, the Silver Spring Library was the only library near his home in Langley Park. He loved to come to the library and read while sitting next to the large windows facing Colesville Road. His experiences at the library led him to become a teacher and then complete a graduate course in Library Science. He later became the Silver Spring Library's head for adult and reference services. Larry Dickter retired in 2005.

A few years after the new building opened, the traditional card catalog system changed too. The cards were replaced with printed catalog books. Three sets of catalogs were produced once a year. The sets listed all books: alphabetically by author, alphabetically by title, and alphabetically by subject. Supplement catalog books were printed periodically throughout the year to keep the catalog reasonably current. Later the printed books were replaced by three sets of microfiche films. The microfiche catalog was much cheaper to produce, but users found it very inconvenient.

In June 1980 the computerized SCION system replaced both the microfiche catalogs and the photographic charging system. Books were bar coded and were checked out with a scanning system. Borrowers were initially given a printed list of the books they checked out and when they were due, but this was not popular with borrowers who were used to seeing something in the book itself telling them when it was due. Blank labels



Librarian Ann Irvine and Library Advisory Committee Secretary Mary Gilbert cut the ribbon on the new "jobs" computer, *Silver Spring Gazette*, April 26, 1995

were soon placed on the back of books. The labels were stamped with the due date when books were checked out. In September and October 1988 the SCION system was replaced by the CARL library computer system. This required re-bar coding all the books and for a while materials were checked on the honor system until the new system was fully in place. The current SIRSI catalog and circulation system, which includes access from home by the Internet, was introduced in July 1999.

### A Small and Aging Library

As time went on, the large modern Silver Spring Library became less large and less modern in comparison to newer libraries built elsewhere down-County and those built to meet the needs of a growing population up-County.

The library was closed for six weeks for renovation in 1973. Three years later, in 1976, the Silver Spring Library was one of two County libraries that made Super-8 films available for home use; it was one of three that had access to "Dialog," an on-line computer information system. Nine years later, the library was the site of the County's experimental first books on tape collection in 1985. Other materials were lost, however, as the library's specialized collection of education-related materials was disbanded. In 1980 when the library system formally designated libraries by size, the Silver Spring Library was categorized as a "small community library," the lowest category with the most limited collections and services.

The library was again closed, this time for about a year, beginning in 1988 and finally reopening in October 1989. The building was renovated and expanded with the addition of a larger periodicals area, but back issue storage was eliminated as was most of the book storage area in the basement. Another change involved the reference collection. What once had been the County's premier reference collection was largely eliminated in favor of a large "quiet room." Although the quiet room was clearly needed, users decried the loss of much of the reference collection. An impressive bronze sculpture by Marcia Billig of the lion and the mouse from Aesop's Fables was placed in the library's front yard as part of the County's Art in Public Architecture program. The Silver Spring Library also became headquarters for the library system's bookmobiles and, until 1992, for cultural and minority Services. Much of the lower level and part of the parking lot was given over to bookmobile administration and support. Despite the library's updated appearance and new sculpture, many library users, who had wanted a better collection, were not pleased. The perception was that the adult collection, which many users had mistakenly thought would be increased along with the renovation was actually even smaller than before.



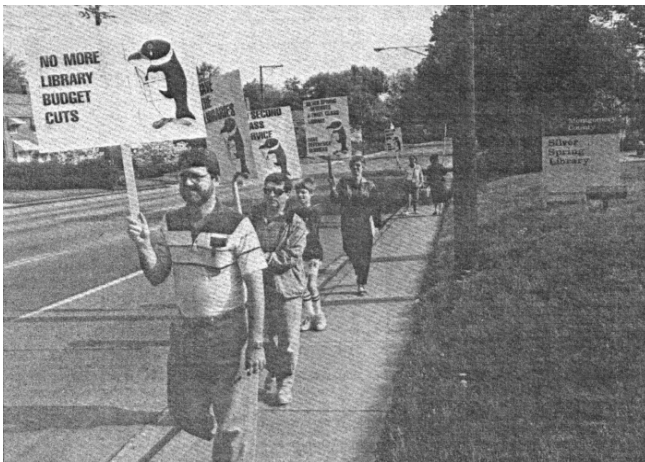
A bronze sculpture accompanied the 1988 renovations.

What in 1957 had been the crown jewel of the County library system had become increasingly out of date. Instead of expanding and upgrading the Silver Spring Library the County built new "Regional" and "Large Community" libraries both elsewhere down-County and up-County. The Silver Spring Library had become among the smallest, if not the smallest, of



the “Small Community” libraries. While every other Central Business District was served by a “regional” library, the library service needs of the Silver Spring Central Business district and the surrounding neighborhoods were to be met with materials sent from other branches on request or through electronic data bases.

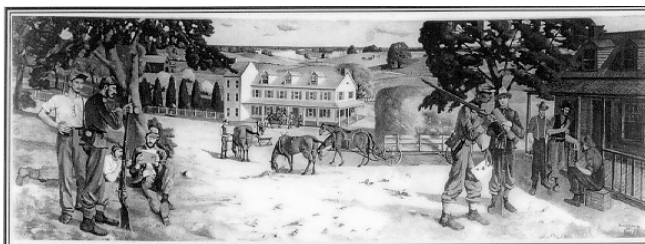
Hours also were cut in a series of County-wide library budget austerity moves. “Small Community” libraries like Silver Spring, were especially hit. The library was closed some evenings and some mornings. It was closed all day on Fridays. Whether the County was keeping its 1951 promise to maintain service at least at the level provided before the library was merged into the new County system was highly debatable. The cutbacks reached the crisis point in 1993. In May of that year about 50 library users staged a protest for better service and more hours at the Silver Spring Library.



**Silver Spring Library users protest budget cuts and reduced hours and staffing, *Silver Spring Gazette*, May 5, 1993**

Friday hours were restored in August 1993. Some other normal operating hours were eventually restored as part of budget increases throughout the library system. In addition some other services targeted to meet what were seen as special needs in Silver Spring were instituted at various times. One of these was establishment of a “Jobs Information Center” in the later 1980s. A “jobs” computer was installed in 1995. Patrons could use it to search for U.S. government jobs, practice for the GED exam, and prepare a resume. A computer dedicated to word processing also has been made available for preparation of resumes. Both computers were purchased with funds from Library Advisory Committee book sales.

An improvement of a different sort took place on July 7, 1997, when the Depression era mural from the old Silver Spring Post Office was unveiled at the library. The mural, which had been thought to be lost after the Post Office at 8412 Georgia



**Silver Spring Post Office Mural “The Old Tavern” at the Silver Spring Library**

Avenue was closed, had been rescued from storage and restored with funds donated by many individuals and organizations and matching funding from the County government. The mural by Nicolai Cikovsky is titled “The Old Tavern.” It depicts the intersection of what is now Georgia Avenue and Colesville Road during the Civil War.

A year after the mural was installed, the library was closed from May 17 through June 22, 1998 for renovations related to installation of an elevator to bring the building into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Before the elevator was installed, persons unable to use the stairs had to go outside and use sidewalks to get from the lower level restrooms and meeting rooms to the main library level. The only practical location for the elevator was in one corner of the children’s room. This created some safety concerns, so the children’s room was moved to the area previously occupied by what was left of the reference collection and the “quiet room.” The small reference collection and the quiet room were moved to where the children’s room had been, but were in a space smaller than the children’s room had occupied because a new wall was constructed for a hallway leading to the elevator. The air conditioning system also was updated. The well-worn carpeting was replaced after intervention by a County Council member led to additional funds being identified for the project.

Another part of the project involved elimination of the children’s desk and assignment of the children’s room staff to a combined adult-children desk near the new children’s area. Adult and children’s desks had already been merged in other libraries in an attempt to provide better service with the limited staff available, which had not been adequate to staff the children’s desk full time. Eliminating the children’s desk was very controversial with some users and staff. Although the Silver Spring Library Advisory Committee supported the project, the Alliance for Better Library Services (ABLS) picketed and petitioned to save a separate children’s desk.

A combination of slightly increased library budgets and stretching staff has allowed increased open hours for the Silver Spring Library and other County libraries in recent years. Silver Spring even opened Sunday afternoons and stayed open until 9 p.m. most evenings.

Despite renovations and other improvements over the years,



**“Pépé” the Silver Spring Library penguin, Library Advisory Committee Chairman Robert Oshel, and County Council Member Derick Berlage cut the ribbon reopening the library on Fridays, *Silver Spring Gazette*, August 25, 1993**

the basic size of the library has not changed. The Silver Spring Library is now the second smallest and second oldest building in the system. Only the historic Noyes Children's Library in Kensington is smaller and older.

For a time the library also suffered from traffic and access problems. The closing of Ellsworth Drive to north-bound traffic at the library parking lot exit in 1993 combined with restricting all southbound traffic to turn right and go to Colesville Road severely impacted use of the library. Library users living south of the library who wanted to go home after visiting the library or users who wanted to go from the library to shop in downtown Silver Spring found the restricted traffic pattern extremely inconvenient. Many have said they no longer used the library because the traffic restrictions are so inconvenient. The restrictions were imposed without any input from the library as part of an effort to restrict traffic in the Seven Oaks-Evanswood neighborhood. During 2001, years of effort to solve the problem finally resulted in a consensus solution developed by an ad-hoc task force established by the Silver Spring Regional Center at the request of County Executive Douglas Duncan. A new exit was built from the library's parking lot so users could go south on Ellsworth and turn south onto Cedar Street.

### Community Support for the Library

The Silver Spring community has continued to support the library in many ways. The Library Advisory Committee (LAC) replaced the Library's Board after the library entered the new County library system. The Library Advisory Committee meets every two months to consider the operation of the library and advise the library administration and the County Library Board on the library needs of the Silver Spring Community. The LAC was revitalized in 1993 when budget cuts threatened the library. The LAC created the library's penguin mascot, P  p  , at that time as part of its outreach activities. (In a sense, P  p   replaced the stuffed alligator that once graced the premises of the library when it was located in the Jesup Blair Community House.) The LAC also historically has raised thousands of dollars through used book sales to purchase books and materials for the library.

The LAC was not in a position to run programs and other activities for the library, so with the encouragement of librarian Ann Irvine, in 1994 a group of LAC members and other interested residents established the Silver Spring Chapter of the Montgomery County Friends of the Library. In 1995 the Friends began its Silver Spring Speakers Series, which over the years has featured Silver Spring authors including Michael Dirda, David Maraniss, Juan Williams, Clarence Page, and George Pelecanos, among many others. The Friends also support other programs at the library including story-tellers, a Chinese Opera performance, appearances by Mother Goose, a cartooning workshop, and many other programs. Other Friends projects have included restoration of "The Old Tavern" mural, and beginning in 1998 an ongoing "Books for Babies" initiative focuses on getting books into the hands of the parents of babies and toddlers up to two years old. More than 500 new board books have been distributed. Because of changes in County Government policies, the Friends have also largely taken over fund-raising activities from the LAC. Among these activities are creation and sale of the popular "Vintage Silver Spring" calendars each year.

### A New Library is Coming!

Although some library needs are being increasingly met by the

Internet and commercial data bases, there has been a generally recognized need for a new Silver Spring Library to meet the needs of an increasingly renewed downtown Silver Spring. The Silver Spring Center Citizens Advisory Board formally complained to the Library administration that Silver Spring was being short changed.

In 1998 planning for a new "Civic Building" in conjunction with revitalization of Downtown Silver Spring provided an opportunity to build a new library. The Facilities Work Group of the Revitalization Steering Committee voted unanimously that the Civic Building should contain a new library. They saw a new library as the "anchor" for the new downtown. But it was not to be, at least then. County Executive Douglas Duncan decreed that the Civic Building would not house a library, although promises were made that a new library would eventually be built. A formal survey of community residents was undertaken to determine library needs. A "program of requirements" for a new facility was developed during 2000. A site selection committee suggested that a mixed-use development with housing and retail in addition to a new library be built on the southwest corner of Fenton Street and Wayne Avenue, across from the new "Downtown Silver Spring" redevelopment. The new library was first added to the FY 2003-2008 Capital Improvement Budget. The current Capital Improvement Budget has land acquisition funds in FY 2007, and much of the site has been acquired. Construction funds are mostly budgeted for FY 2011. The new Silver Spring Library is coming!



**P  p  , the Silver Spring Library penguin**

This history was written by Robert E. Oshel, Ph.D., and is published by the Silver Spring Friends of the Library and the Silver Spring Library Advisory Committee as a joint project to celebrate the Silver Spring Library's 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Opinions expressed are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Silver Spring Friends of the Library or Library Advisory Committee. Research was conducted by Robert E. Oshel and by Linda A. Siegenthaler and Marjorie Clarkson, who contributed both interview material and archives research. Materials were found in the collections of the Silver Spring Library, the Montgomery County Archives, the Maryland National Capital-Park and Planning Commission Archives, the Silver Spring Historical Society, Virginia Peters, and the Woodside Park Civic Association. Especially significant sources were Mary Burch Deffinbaugh's "The Woman's Improvement Club of Silver Spring, Maryland: A History, 1913-1940;" Didrikke Moen Rice's "A History of the Silver Spring, Maryland Public Library from 1931 to 1951," a Masters of Science Dissertation submitted to The Catholic University of America; and clippings scrapbooks at the Silver Spring Library. Illustrations are from the Silver Spring Library, the *Silver Spring Gazette*, the *Maryland News*, the *Washington Post*, the *Pioneer* [a publication of the Library Bureau of Remington Rand], the Silver Spring Historical Society, the Lee Development Group, and the author.